Raymond H. Thompson

The Crisis in Archeological Collection Management

The roots of the current crisis in archeological collection management go back to the beginning of the 20th century when much energy was directed toward the passage of antiquities legislation to protect sites on federal land. On September 3, 1904, Edgar Lee Hewett submitted to Land Commissioner William A. Richards his celebrated Memorandum Concerning the Historic and Prehistoric Ruins of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah, and their Preservation, thereby launching the final campaign that resulted in the passage of the Antiquities Act of 1906. In it Hewett insisted that the collections removed from ruins "by competent authorities" should be "properly cared for" and that "all data that can be secured" should be "made a matter of permanent record."

Although Hewett was a man with expansive and ambitious ideas, never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined how these policies would affect his successors at the end of the 20th century. Through that century citizens and politicians, archeologists and lawmakers, preservationists and administrators labored to create the extensive body of law and regulation that gives this country a highly effective program of archeological preservation. Archeologists, following Hewett's pioneering statement, consider every site to be a unique repository of information about the past that "can contribute something to the advancement of knowledge." They have striven to recover and preserve that knowledge for the benefit of present and future generations. The result of this century of collecting activity is that archeological collection managers today are overwhelmed by a veritable flood of objects and documentation. They face a crisis of major proportions.

In Hewett's day, the amount of material recovered consisted mostly of whole pots and artifacts. Large eastern museums openly and vigorously competed for the privilege of acquiring, curating, and exhibiting archeological collections from federal lands in the Southwest. By mid-century, most museums were willingly accepting and caring for the small collections of archeological material that came from federal land. Often no more than a few cardboard boxes (frequently beer cases) of artifacts were involved. Within the next two decades, however, the flow of collections from projects mandated by federal, state, and local law had reached alarming proportions. In the last two decades of the century, the quantity of archeological material, both objects and associated documentation, has increased exponentially. Some institutions have had to cease providing repository services altogether.

The experience of the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona is typical. In 1969-1970 it curated almost 950 standardized archive boxes (about three cubic feet each, almost the same size as those beer cases) of archeological material from federal projects and almost twice as many by 1979-1980. A decade later in 1989-1990, the Museum had 8,624 boxes, more than four times as many as in 1979-1980. The volume doubled again in 1999-2000. The Arizona State Museum has essentially filled up the six floors of library stacks it occupied in 1977, and has no room left for the more than 20,000 additional boxes it has already contracted to accept over the next couple of years. Institutions and agencies throughout the country are experiencing similar growth pains as a result of the pace of archeological activity carried out under national policy directives.

In an effort to meet these challenges, museum specialists have become more professional in the way they care for archeological collections. The promulgation by the National Park Service of Rules for the Curation of Federally Owned and Administered Archeological Collections (36 CFR pt. 79) is an important example of this increased sophistication in collection management. No longer can administrators require that archeological collections be stored in abandoned pole barns or the basement of condemned buildings because "they are only old rocks." We have developed better systems of documentation and have automated our databases,

thereby creating greater access to the information. We can now reach out and serve the public in new and exciting ways, but we are not taking full advantage of these opportunities. As a result we are unable to provide convincing data when the administrators and the politicians, who control the funding, request information on the use, that is the public benefit, of the collections we hold. We face another crisis of credibility unless we can develop and make use of more innovative and effective ways of reaching out to the many curious members of the public who want to enjoy and appreciate the knowledge that we so earnestly save for the "benefit of present and future generations."

Despite the progress that has been made, we have not addressed adequately our biggest problem, the exponential growth of the archeological collections. The standard response to this problem, of course, has been another request for more funding, more staff, more space. Because most of the archeological collections result from various kinds of federal undertakings, we tend to look to the federal government for these resources. We ask for direct grants, discuss the need for state-based federal repositories, and even consider the transfer of collections to other federal agencies or Indian tribes. At the same time, we refuse even to think about reducing the quantity of material that we save, despite the fact that it is the most rational way of dealing with the flood. Instead, we exacerbate the problem by continuing to save the evidence of the past blindly and indiscriminately. Although there are powerful legal mandates for archeological work, our political system responds to all mandates by a continual process of resource allocation that requires setting priorities and making choices. Now that we have both the legal mandates and a foothold in the budgetary process, we must begin to set the priorities and make the choices that will discriminate between what must be saved and what should be discarded.

Although archeologists have finally begun to recognize that some sites are more important than others and to adjust their research accordingly, national policy continues to insist that all of the material recovered from such sites must be saved. If we can recognize that there is a scale of significance for archeological sites, we should be able to see that there is a comparable scale of relative importance for the objects recovered. Because we are in the business of saving the evidence of the past, it is difficult for us to accept this idea and even more difficult to implement it. But it is our special responsibility to do so, because we alone control the knowledge and the criteria of judgment that are required. If we are unable to make the choices that will help reduce the flow of collections into our curatorial facilities, others within the legal and political system who are less qualified will do so. We must act, because we are unable to keep forever under controlled curatorial conditions all of the archeological collections we now hold, to say nothing of the huge surge of material to come from ongoing and future federal undertakings.

While the burden created by this crisis falls primarily on the shoulders of the collection managers, the responsibility for coping with it must be shared by the archeologists. Traditionally, archeologists have been content to deposit the materials they recover (sometimes without adequate documentation) with museum caretakers and then forget about them. Although archeologists insist that such collections be saved for future research, few of them ever return to restudy the material. Some investigators even claim that these older collections lack research value because the original collectors did not ask the right questions in their research design.

Archeologists and curators must now work together to develop the criteria for making the decisions necessary for selecting adequately documented representative samples that merit long-term care. Tough decisions will have to be made and there will be some mistakes along the way. But in the process it will be possible to forge a national policy that will help discriminate what should be saved from what should not. Significant progress has already been made. Although federal policy assigns equal significance to all archeological sites, archeologists routinely make decisions that identify some sites as more important than others, even though they may not admit in their reports that they have done so. Ten years ago, the National Park Service published a proposed Rule for Deaccessioning Bulk Archeological Material in Federal Collections. Last year the Department of Defense issued Draft Guidelines for the Field Collection of Archeological Materials and Standard Operating Procedures for Curating Department of Defense Archeological Collections.

These efforts address directly the two collection management problems that lie at the core of the present crisis. We need two coordinated sets of policy and procedure in order to meet this

crisis: one to guide the deaccessioning of undocumented and redundant portions of the federal collections already under our control, and another for selecting documented representative samples from the mass of material to come. New resources will undoubtedly be needed to accomplish these two related goals. If we move expeditiously, we will be in a position to justify requests for such resources because we will have in place a rational and implementable method for prioritizing their expenditure.

The archeological community has gained great credibility within the preservation world by insisting, as did Hewett in 1904-1905, that we do not need to save physically all of the sites, but rather the critical information about the past that they contain. Now is the time to build on that credibility and demonstrate that we can discriminate between critical and non-critical information. Archeologists, museum curators, Indian tribes, and agency officials must join forces to work on this next phase of the nation's constantly evolving historic preservation policy. We must find ways of selecting from the great mass of archeological material that part of the evidence of the past that we should save for those present and future generations.

Raymond H. Thompson is Director Emeritus of the Arizona State Museum and Fred A. Riecker Distinguished Professor of Anthropology Emeritus, The University of Arizona, Tucson.

Ann Hanniball

Non-Federal Museums Managing Federal Collections

The Utah Museum of Natural History

[This] vast and austere landscape embraces a spectacular array of scientific and historic resources.... Even today, this unspoiled natural area remains a frontier; a quality that greatly enhances [its] value for scientific study. [Here there is] a long and dignified human history; it is a place where one can see how nature shapes human endeavors in the American West; where distance and aridity have been pitted against our dreams and courage. [This place] presents exemplary opportunities for geologists, paleontologists, archaeologists, historians and biologists.[1]

Thus begins the Proclamation establishing Utah's new Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument which, the Proclamation attests, was created principally for its value for scientific study. In truth, the Proclamation's language might apply to the majority of Utah's vast public lands. This is a region of North America that is a major center of diversity for all fields of natural history and, consequently, has witnessed a century of scientific research.

The Utah Museum of Natural History (UMNH, the Museum) is Utah's state museum of natural history. By legislative mandate it is located at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, Utah's capital city. The Museum is charged with collecting and displaying for educational and cultural purposes, "tangible objects reflecting the past, present and continuing development of our [Utah's] natural history." We also are directed to provide traveling exhibits and outreach programs about archeology and paleontology to people throughout the state, and to oversee and assist in the proper care of archeological and paleontological collections recovered from state lands and housed in facilities in Utah.[2] With its partner institution, the Hansen Planetarium, the UMNH hosted 258,874 on-site visitors and delivered exhibits and educational programs to another 93,624 people throughout Utah in 1999.

The important regional collections housed at the Museum are of high scientific value. They are central to the Museum's mission, and its mandate as the state museum of natural history. And, overwhelmingly, because of the high federal ownership of Utah lands, the Museum's collections are federal collections.